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ABSTRACT

One way to approach the question of whether teaching adults is different is by examining the types of learning in which adults engage. Adult learning has been classified as subject oriented, consumer oriented, and emancipatory. Only emancipatory education has been described as unique to adulthood, but even that claim has been challenged. As a result of the research and theory building of Mezirow, emancipatory adult learning has become more commonly known as transformative learning. Fostering transformative learning demands a different approach by the educator. Although learners must decide on their own to engage in it, educators who wish to promote transformative learning have the responsibility to set the stage and provide opportunities for critical reflection. Examining what adult learners expect from teaching provides another perspective on whether teaching adults is different. Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon have combined and reanalyzed research that examined adult college students' expectations of effective teaching and compared them with those of traditional students. The adult learners demonstrate preferences for characteristics associated with both student-centered and teacher-directed learning. Four teacher characteristics mentioned by adults that were not among the top items for undergraduates were as follows: creates a comfortable learning atmosphere, uses a variety of techniques, adapts to diverse needs, and is dedicated to teaching. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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Teaching Adults: Is It Different? Myths and Realities

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Myths and **REALITIES**

by Susan Imel *1995*

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TEACHING ADULTS: IS IT DIFFERENT?

The adult education literature generally supports the idea that teaching adults should be approached in a different way than teaching children and adolescents. The assumption that teachers of adults should use a different style of teaching is based on the widely espoused theory of andragogy, which suggests that "adults expect learner-centered settings where they can set their own goals and organize their own learning around their present life needs" (Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon 1993, p. 148). However, even in the field of adult education, debate occurs about the efficacy of a separate approach for teaching adults. Some believe that adult education is essentially the same process as education generally (Garrison 1994) and therefore does not require a separate teaching approach: that is, all good teaching, whether for adults or children, should be responsive in nature.

The question of whether teaching adults is different remains ambiguous. For example, research summarized in an ***ERIC Digest*** (Imel 1989) has shown that even those educators who say they believe in using an andragogical approach do not necessarily use a different style when teaching adults. Additional myths and realities related to teaching adults are explored in this publication. Two areas are examined: types of adult learning and what learners themselves want from teachers.

Different Types of Adult Learning

One way to approach the question of whether teaching adults is different is by examining the types of learning in which adults engage. Drawing upon the work of Habermas and Mezirow, Cranton (1994) classified adult learning into three categories:

- **Subject-oriented adult learning**—In adult learning contexts that are subject oriented, the primary goal is to acquire content. The educator "speaks of covering the material, and the learners see themselves as gaining knowledge or skills" (ibid., p. 10).
- **Consumer-oriented adult learning**—The goal of consumer-oriented learning is to fulfill the expressed needs of learners. Learners set their learning goals, identify objectives, select relevant resources, and so forth. The educator acts as a facilitator or resource person, "and does not engage in challenging or questioning what learners say about their needs" (ibid., p. 12).
- **Emancipatory adult learning**—The goal of emancipatory learning is to free learners from the forces that limit their options and control over their lives, forces that they have taken for granted or seen as beyond their control. Emancipatory learning results in transformations of learner perspectives through critical reflection (Mezirow 1991). The educator plays an active role in fostering critical reflection by challenging learners to consider why they hold certain assumptions, values, and beliefs (Cranton 1994).

Of the three types of adult learning, only emancipatory has been described as unique to adulthood, but even that claim has been challenged (Merriam and Caffarella 1991). Subject-oriented learning is the most common form of learning engaged in by youth. Collaborative and cooperative learning and other types of experiential learning that are more consumer oriented are also found in youth classrooms. However, according to Mezirow (1981), emancipatory learning, with its emphasis upon learner transformation, can take place only in adulthood because, "it is only in late adolescence and in adulthood that a person can recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it" (p. 11). In adulthood, "rather than merely adapting to changing circumstances by more diligently applying old ways of knowing . . . [individuals] discover a need to acquire new perspectives in order to gain a more complete understanding of changing events and a higher degree of control over their lives. The formative learning of childhood becomes transformative learning in adulthood" (Mezirow 1991, p. 3). As a result of the research and theory-building efforts of Mezirow—fully described in ***Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*** (1991)—emancipatory adult learning has become more commonly known as transformative learning.

Teaching Approaches for Transformative Learning

If transformative learning is unique to adulthood, does it require the use of teaching approaches that are geared specifically to adults? This is not clear. It is true that transformative learning requires that learners address problems through critical reflection. Some strategies used to facilitate transformative learning, e.g., such as journal writing, critical incidents, and experiential methods, are used in other types of learning as well. (See Cranton 1994 and Mezirow and Associates 1990 for a full discussion of these and other methods that can be used to promote transformative learning.)

What is clear is that fostering transformative learning demands a different approach by the educator. Although learners must decide on their own to engage in transformative learning, educators who wish to promote transformative learning have the responsibility to set the stage and provide opportunities for critical reflection (Cranton 1994). When educators are operating in the domain of transformative learning, they help learners examine their beliefs and how they have acquired them by creating situations in which they can debate how their values, assumptions, ideologies, and beliefs have come to be constructed (Newman 1993). Instead of congratulating themselves for having made their point when a learner says, "I never looked at it that way before," educators can help learners engage in transformative learning by responding with, "'How *did* you see things?' and then, 'What made you see things like that?' and then 'If we can understand how you came to have a set of ideas and attitudes then, let's look at how you come to have the ideas and attitudes you have now'" (ibid., p. 182).

Of course, not all adult learning is transformative in nature; many adult educators also do not believe that they have a role in helping adults engage in critical reflection and, consequently, never operate in the transformative domain. Those who do, however, perceive that teaching adults is different.

What Do Adults Expect from Teaching?

Examining what adult learners expect from teaching provides another perspective on whether teaching adults is different. In this context, the question might be more appropriately posed, "Based on adult students' expectations, should teaching adults be different?" In an effort to answer this question, Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon (1993) combined and reanalyzed research that examined adult college students' expectations of effective teaching and compared them with those of traditional students.

Previously, each of the authors had conducted investigations that looked at aspects of this question. Donaldson (1989) used a case study approach to examine student letters recommending faculty members for an excellence in off-campus teaching award. Flannery (1991) interviewed 68 returning students during the first semester back at school, asking them what they expected of instructors in the classroom. Ross-Gordon (1991) used the Critical Incident Technique to collect examples of the best and poorest instructors that respondents had encountered during college. Data for Ross-Gordon's study were collected through a questionnaire mailed to a randomly selected sample of adult undergraduates. The results from all three studies suggested that adult students might have "different" expectations for teachers that in some ways paralleled the assumptions underlying an andragogical approach, but each researcher also found some similarities to expectations for a teacher-directed approach. By combining the results of their studies, the researchers were able to confirm and extend their individual results and also add an element that compared the expectations of adult students to those of traditional students as reflected in the literature.

In the combined results, the six most frequently mentioned attributes adult learners expected of effective instructors were as follows (Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon 1993, p. 150):

- to be knowledgeable
- to show concern for student learning
- to present material clearly
- to motivate
- to emphasize relevance of class material
- to be enthusiastic

Thus, the adult learners in this study demonstrated preferences for characteristics associated with both student-centered (e.g., relevance of material, concern for student learning) and teacher-directed (e.g., knowledge, clarity) instruction. When adult expectations for good teaching were compared with those of traditional students, many similarities existed in how the two groups characterized good teaching. However, four teacher characteristics mentioned by adults that were not among the top items for undergraduates were as follows:

- creates a comfortable learning atmosphere
- uses a variety of techniques
- adapts to meet diverse needs
- dedicated to teaching

Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon (1993) point out that the first three of these items are congruent with the principles of instruction found in the adult education literature. Perhaps, as suggested by the researchers, when it comes to teaching adults, "the issue is not to continue to promote an either/or approach with regard to teaching expectations of adults, but rather to concentrate on the particular attributes which adults consistently select as important for effective teaching" (ibid., p. 150).

Conclusion

Is teaching adults different? Based upon the literature discussed here, the answer is both *yes* and *no*. Perhaps a better way to frame the question would be "*Should* teaching adults be different?" The answer to that would, of course, depend upon the purpose of the teaching-learning situation, including what approach and methods seem to be appropriate, as well as the needs of the learners. Many of the myths related to teaching adults emerge from an uncritical acceptance of the theory of andragogy. Unfortunately, the assumptions underlying the theory are still largely untested through research. Pratt (1993) also points out that adult educators need to examine the philosophical assumptions underlying andragogy in order to clarify "the underlying values and beliefs and . . . central concept of [adult] learning" (p. 87).

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